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ABSTRACT

Previous research has shown that seeking help is an important and ubiquitous behavior in higher education. However, relatively little is known about the person and situation determinants of academic help-seeking. This study was designed to differentiate types of help-seeking and examine sources of help and goals. Students (N=386) in biology, English literature, and social sciences courses at four types of institutions of higher education provided data. Data were collected at the beginning and end of the academic term. Students who used more help-seeking and other strategies also sought help more when required. Students who engaged in rehearsal (rote processes of repetition, recopying, and memorization) were more likely to seek help from fellow students than from instructors or study skills personnel. Conversely, students who engaged in the more complex strategies of critical and original thinking were more likely to utilize formal rather than informal sources. In general, the role of threat to self-esteem was more highly related to resource management and lower complexity cognitive strategies (rehearsal) than to more complex strategies (critical and original thinking). (ABL)

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VARIETIES OF HELP-SEEKING AS A LEARNING STRATEGY AND THE ROLE OF SELF-ESTEEM THREAT

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Several studies support the assertion that seeking help is an important and ubiquitous behavior in higher education (Ames, 1983; Knapp & Karabenick, 1988; Nelson-LeGall et al., 1983). It is estimated that nearly all (95%) of college freshmen and sophomores need help with their studies during a typical term and that about three-fourths of these seek some form of assistance during that time period (Knapp & Karabenick, 1988). Thus, a large proportion of students turn to others in order to perform successfully. Yet, relatively little is known about the person and situation determinants of academic help-seeking.

In the present context, help-seeking is conceptualized as a learning strategy. More specifically, it is classified as a type of resource management. It is possible to think of seeking help as managing the flow of information necessary to complete academic assignments. However, two features make it unique among strategies. First, unlike other strategies, there is cultural stigma attached to its use; one is supposed to achieve independently, and to require help can be threatening to one's self-esteem. Second, help-seeking typically requires interpersonal contact (e.g., with instructors or classmates) which can engender further threat in the form of public embarrassment. Personal and social threat can inhibit seeking needed help, unlike the use of other strategies which are ostensibly non-threatening.

The present research agenda began by examining the relations between the use of help-seeking and other strategies, asking whether students who employ a variety of learning strategies also seek help when needed or whether they prefer instead to achieve independently. The answer is clearly the former. As reported in Karabenick (1987), the degree to which students indicated they would acquire academic assistance if necessary was significantly related to nine out of ten other strategies measured on the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ: McKeachie, et al., 1986; Pintrich, 1987) . Thus, students who engage in organization, planning, monitoring, critical thinking, and the like, also take advantage of helping resources should the need arise. From the reverse perspective, students who fail to make use of many learning strategies to enhance their performance are also less likely to seek help when needed.

The present study was designed to elaborate this basic relation by differentiating types of help-seeking, which the previous study made no explicit attempt to separate. Here, we examine two fundmental distinctions which are highlighted in Table 1: source of help and goals. A major source dimension is formality. Examples of informal sources of assistance are other students and friends. Typical formal (i.e., institutional) sources are study skills centers, tutors, and instructors. Previous research has shown that the use of informal and formal sources of help covary (Karabenick & Knapp, 1988). From this it is expected that relations between general strategy use and help-seeking would not differ as a function of source formality.

With respect to goals, we can distinguish between help that is sought for executive or instrumental purposes (Nelson-LeGall, et al., 1983). The goal of executive help-seeking is to reduce the cost of accomplishing a task, e.g., asking somebody for the answers to a math problem. By contrast, instrumental help-seeking has as its goal acquiring certain skills or information necessary to achieve independently or to improve the quality of one's performance, e.g., asking for help in understanding a mathematical principle which is then employed in solving the problem. Different degrees of relations between general strategy use and executive vs. instrumental help-seeking were predicted. If employing more strategies indicates a more active approach to learning, then students who report more general strategy use should indicate their help-seeking goal as increasing their general skills and information base more than students who are not so active. Alternatively, students who report using few strategies should, when seeking help, be more likely to report their help-seeking attempts as executive in nature. In other words, relations between the use of strategies and executive help-seeking are expected to be lower than with instrumental help-seeking.

The second focus concerns the role of threat to self-esteem in help-seeking. Prior research indicates that students threatened by help-seeking are less prone to seek it (Fisher, et al., 1983; Karabenick & Knapp, 1986; Shapiro, 1983); the same relation is expected here. If it is also true that students who are threatened by seeking help use fewer strategies, then the relations between strategies and help-seeking may be mediated by threat. In other words, the reason that students who use few strategies also fail to seek help when needed may be spurious, attributable to the potential loss of esteem and embarrassment. This was determined by examining the reduction in strategy–help-seeking relations when controlling for threat.

Method

Subjects and procedure

Students in biology, english literature and the social sciences (Sociology and Psychology) courses at four types of institutions of higher education provided data. Types of schools included a research university, a comprehensive graduate school, a small liberal arts college, and a community college. Data were collected at the beginning and end of an academic term by means of surveys distributed either by instructors or project personnel. Students were required to identify themselves with the promise of confidentiality. A total of 386 students completed both phases of data collection. Missing data on some scales caused slightly reduced *n*s for some analyses (using a casewise deletion procedure which dropped a subject if any dimension was missing for that test).

Measures

Variables were assessed using the MSLQ which uses a 7-point response format with anchors of "not at all true of me" and "very true of me." Self-reports of 11 strategies were obtained. Cognitive strategies include: rehearsal, selection, organization, elaboration, metacognition, surface processing, critical thinking, and original thinking. Resource scales include: time and study management, study environment management, and effort management. A simple index was also constructed to provide a general index of strategy use which consists of the mean of all 11 strategy scales.

Help-seeking tendencies were assessed both at the beginning and end of the term. The help-seeking scale used at the beginning of the term was global and did not differentiate between sources of assistance or goals. Items were worded contingently, students indicating their tendencies given need: I try to identify students in class whom I can ask for help if necessary. I ask the instructors to clarify concepts I don't understand well. When I can't understand the material in this course, I ask another student for help. I try to do the work for this class on my own, without help. Students estimated the extent of their help-seeking at the end of the term with items differentiating between sources and goals. Assistance from formal sources was measured by: I went to my instructor for help with my course work during this term. I got help with my general study skills this term. Informal sources were obtained with these items: I asked other students for help with the work for this class during the term. I asked friends or family members for help with the work for this class during the term. These two scales were also combined to provide an estimate of total help-seeking behavior.

Single items assessed executive and instrumental help-seeking goals. The executive help-seeking item consisted of: I got help this term primarily to make it easier for me to finish my course work. The instrumental item was: I sought help so I could understand the general concepts in the course, not just to get the answers. Two items on the end-of-term survey assessed students' need for help during the term: I needed help with my work for this class during the term. I needed help with my general study skills during the term. Self-esteem threat was measured at the beginning of the term. The items were: I believe that getting help with my course work would be admitting my lack of ability. I believe that people would think less of me if I got help in order to succeed in this course. I would think less of myself if I couldn't do my course work without help.

Results and Discussion

Strategy use and type of help-seeking. Associations between help-seeking and other strategy use were examined in two ways. First, strategies were related to contingent help-seeking tendencies assessed at the term's outset. Second, end-of-term measures related strategy use to reported help-seeking, differentiating between source of support and help-seeking goals. Since students who use more strategies also perform better, and have less need for assistance, it is necessary to adjust for degree of need. First-order partials were used to control for differences in need levels.

Table 2 presents Pearson correlation coefficients between the reported use of each strategy, the strategy index, and each of the help-seeking measures. Virtually all correlations are significant but vary in magnitude. The two left columns essentially replicate the results of previous research (Karabenick, 1987), demonstrating again the general tendency for students who use more strategies to also seek help when required (general strategy index rs of .31 and .34, both $p < .001$).

The right four columns in Table 2 show relations separately for each type of help-seeking. From the general indexes it would appear that there is no difference as a function of source of help, with rs of .29 ($p < .001$) for both formal and informal types. However, there are indications of different, and offsetting, directional patterns among the specific strategies. Of particular note, the association between the use of rehearsal is higher for informal than formal sources, whereas the reverse is true for critical thinking, original thinking and time and study management. This may be a function of differences in the level of complexity or higher-order cognitive processing involved. Specifically, rehearsal primarily involves rote processes such as repetition, recopying and memorization. Students who engage in rehearsal are apparently more likely to also seek out friends and other students for help ($r(366) = .28$, $p < .001$) to a greater extent than their instructors or study skills personnel ($r(366) = .17$, $p < .001$). Conversely, students who engage in the more complex strategies of critical and original thinking are more likely to utilize formal rather than informal sources. The same tends to be true for time and study management which suggests that students who manage their resources to devote more time to their courses also prefer formal ($r(366) = .27$, $p < .001$) to informal sources ($r(366) = .19$, $p < .001$). This is admittedly speculative, however, and requires further analyses which dimensionalize the strategies according to the degree of cognitive complexity.

Differences in the strength of association between strategies and help-seeking goals are much more consistent. In general, higher relations are present between general strategy use and instrumental ($r(366) = .40$, $p < .001$) than executive help-seeking ($r(366) = .18$, $p < .001$). This difference is more pronounced with some strategies (e.g., original thinking) than others (e.g., critical thinking), but the overall pattern is unmistakable. We might conclude that instrumental help-seeking is the predominant goal of students who use more strategies. However, some caution is suggested given these are one-item scales with the potential for differences in reliability and validity.

Role of threat to self-esteem. The influence of self-esteem threat was examined by determining its relations with other variables, then by assessing its influence on the relation between strategy use and help-seeking. Relations between threat and the use of strategies are shown in Table 3. While the magnitudes vary, they are uniformly negative and most are significant, including the general strategy indexes (r's of -.18 and -.16). Of particular note is the high relation between threat and time and study resource management ($r(380) = -.30$, $p < .001$). In general, threat is more highly related to resource management and lower complexity cognitive strategies (e.g., rehearsal) than to more complex strategies (e.g., critical and original thinking).

Associations between threat and help-seeking are shown in the second row of Table 4. As expected they are inverse but low and not all are significant. Also shown in Table 4 is the influence of partialling threat on the correlations between general strategy indexes and measures of help-seeking. Quite clearly the influence is either absent or negligible. Therefore, the relations between strategy use and help-seeking are not attributable to threat to self-esteem. Of course, other simultaneously related covariates not measured here could render those relations spurious. However, in their absence it appears that help-seeking and other strategies covary as function of students' general approach to accomplishing academic tasks.

The following conclusions appear justified given the results in the present study: 1) Although overall the relation between help-seeking behavior and other strategy use is similar for both informal and institutional sources of assistance, differences exist for specific strategies; 2) Strategy use is more strongly related to instrumental than to executive help-seeking; 3) While threat to self-esteem is inversely related to both help-seeking and other strategy use, its contribution to their association is negligible. Subsequent investigations will focus on the characteristics of particular strategies (e.g., degree of cognitive complexity) and on situational variables that may moderate the relations examined in the present study (e.g., type of classroom structure).

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Table 1

Varieties of Help-Seeking: Sources and Goals

	Source Differences
Informal:	Non-institutional sources such as classmates, other students, friends and family.
Formal:	Institutional sources such as instructors, tutors, and study skills centers
	Help-Seeking Goals
Executive:	Help-seeking with the intention of reducing the cost of achievement in terms of time, effort, etc.
Instrumental:	Help-seeking designed to acquire information or skills necessary to achieve independently and/or improve the quality of performance

Table 2

Correlations Between Strategy Use and Help-Seeking

Strategy	Contingent*	Help-Seeking Measure				
		Total	Source		Goal	
			Informal	Formal	Executive	Instrumental
Cognitive						
Rehearsal	.24	.28	.28	.17	.12	.31
Selection	-.10	-.04	-.06	.00	.05	-.02
Organization	.27	.34	.30	.25	.16	.36
Elaboration	.35	.33	.30	.24	.15	.34
Surface Processing	.14	.10	.10	.07	-.04	.16
Critical Thinking	.16	.27	.15	.31	.20	.29
Original Thinking	.14	.18	.09	.22	.06	.26
Metacognition	.32	.31	.25	.27	.19	.36
Resource Management						
Time and Study	.17	.27	.19	.27	.22	.31
Study Environment	.24	.22	.18	.18	.18	.27
Effort	.15	.29	.22	.25	.18	.32
General Strategy Index	.31	.34	.29	.29	.18	.40

*Note: Correlations in this column are based on data obtained at the beginning of the term. All others use data obtained at the end of the term and control for level of need.

$p < .05 = .10$
$p < .01 = .13$
$p < .001 = .17$

Table 3

Correlations Between Self-Esteem Threat and Strategy Use

Strategy	Strategies Assessed at Beginning of Term	End of Term
Cognitive		
Rehearsal	-.12	-.14
Selection	-.12	-.10
Organization	-.06	-.11
Elaboration	-.11	-.08
Surface Processing	.00	-.08
Critical Thinking	.03	-.04
Original Thinking	-.04	.04
Metacognition	-.20	-.18
Resource Management		
Time and Study	-.30	-.17
Study Environment	-.17	-.11
Effort	-.16	-.13
General Strategy Index	-.18	-.16

$p < .05 = .10$
$p < .01 = .13$
$p < .001 = .17$

Table 4

Influence of Controlling for Self-Esteem Threat on Relations Between the Use of Strategies and Help-Seeking

		Help - Seeking Measure				
			Source		Goal	
Strategy	Contingent*	Total	Informal	Formal	Executive	Instrumental
Correlations between general strategy index and help-seeking (see Table 2)	.31	.34	.29	.29	.18	.40
Correlations between threat to self-esteem and help-seeking	-.19	-.11	-.13	-.04	-.07	-.19
Correlations between general strategy index and help-seeking controlling for threat	.29	.34	.27	.29	.18	.38

*Note: Correlations in this column are based on data obtained at the beginning of the term. All others use data obtained at the end of the term and control for level of need.

$p < .05 = .10$
$p < .01 = .13$
$p < .001 = .17$